

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF OTTO WIDMANN

I have been asked how I got my great love of birds, whether it is inherited or acquired. To this I can answer that my love of nature was inherited and cultivated in early youth, but my great love of birds was acquired in manhood. I do not know much about my mother, because she died when I was only ten years old; but I know that she loved gardening, for I was told that she worked in the garden on the day of the evening I was born during a thunderstorm June 15, 1841. My father was a nature lover and a devoted friend of everything beautiful in God's creation and as such admired the loveliest of all creatures, the birds, although he did not make a real study of them. He was especially interested in plant life and had collected in his younger years a large herbarium. Being connected with the management of the domains of the state, the grand duchy of Baden, he had opportunity to gather minerals on his tours of inspection and had in the course of time assembled a fine collection. He was a member of a club which met every evening from 6 to 8. Other members were also friends of animals and plants and when they learned of something unusual, told what they knew or brought specimens to the club, leaving them with those most interested. In this way my father brought home curiosities which made lasting impressions. One still vivid in my memory is the peculiar nest of a Schwanzmeise, Long-tailed Tit. It had been attached to the handle of a pump, from which it had to be removed when the pump was used. The nest was a curious structure, a real work of art, about eight inches long by four and one-half inches wide, a cylindrical bag, entirely closed with only one small hole on the side near the top; it was made of moss and leaves bound together by spider webs and lined with feathers and horse hair.

When I was old enough, I accompanied my older brother on his bird-egging expeditions. There were a few more boys of our age collecting birds' eggs, rivaling to find the most and the rarest specimens. The search for eggs brings great surprises and I remember well certain events, for instance, when I found, quite unexpectedly, the nest, with four or five eggs, of the Baumpieper, Tree Pipit. We boys were as usual somewhat scattered in going through the forest when I almost stepped on the nest from which the bird flew. It was a treasure, for it was the first ever found and the eggs were so different from all other eggs, a chocolate brown with markings of a darker color. It was in that same forest that we were remarkably fortunate in finding Cuckoo's eggs in other birds' nests. Most of them were found in the nests of



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the Wren, and this is so much more interesting since the nests of the European Wren are globular affairs, built in between sprouts on trunks of old elm trees, a few feet from the ground. The question has been put forth, who was right, the one who says the Cuckoo sits on the nest or lays the egg on the ground and deposits it with its bill in the nest? An Englishman announced he would pay a certain sum to the person who can prove that the egg is carried in the beak to the nest. But how could a big bird sit into a small oven-like nest of the Wren? Impossible! And why should the Cuckoo not be able to carry the egg, which is remarkably small for the size of the bird, in its bill for a short distance? Other birds do it. The Whip-poor-will carries its two eggs to another place when it finds that somebody has discovered them.

When my father saw how interested we were in our egg collecting, he bought us a bird book, "Die Naturgeschichte der Voegel Deutschland's," von C. G. Friderich, often called "The Little Naumann," a book of nearly a thousand pages and over two hundred colored illustrations of birds. He also subscribed to the quarterly magazine, "Naumannia," then the organ of the leading ornithologists of Germany. I obtained permission to visit the Hofbibliothek, the private library of the Grand Duke. Its chief attraction was the great work of Germany's eminent ornithologist, Professor Dr. Joh. Friedrich Naumann, published between 1820 and 1844 in twelve volumes with copper-engraved colored illustrations of all birds found in Germany. I was even allowed to take volumes of the valuable work home with me. Adjoining the library was the Naturalienkabinet, a small but good Natural History Museum. The bird line was well represented, but stuffed birds, as we called them, did not appeal to me so much as the living ones. For these I did not have to go far, for there was quite a variety in the Schlossgarten itself, among them the celebrated songster, the Nightingale. Adjoining the garden were the Deerpark and the Pheasantry, where Pheasants were raised. Besides these two places to which permission was necessary, was the Hardtwald, a forest of conifers several miles long. Deciduous woods were plentiful around the city and with the foothills of the Black Forest on one side and the River Rhein on the other with its many ox-bows, Karlsruhe was certainly and still is a fine place for the ornithologist. Two ponds where ducks were trapped in nets by means of decoys and a fox-like dog, ought to be mentioned, because a visit to one of these places is a thing not to be forgotten.

During the first twenty years after entering the drug business on April 1, 1857, I had neither time nor desire to cultivate acquaintance

with bird life. I had an innate bent for knowledge of natural science in general and my reading was confined to such literature. I never found pleasure in reading fiction; chemistry and botany occupied much of my time during the three and a half years of apprenticeship and the French language when clerking in Switzerland. As a student in the Polytechnicum in Karlsruhe, preparing for the state examination I had little time for extraneous work, but later when traveling I never neglected to visit the Natural History Museums and Zoological Gardens, wherever I was, Frankfurt, Berlin, Hamburg, Koeln, Brussels, Antwerpen, London and Paris. This helped me greatly in keeping up my interest in animals in general and in birds in particular.

My first bird in America was such a conspicuous beauty that it made a deep impression on my mind. It was in the summer of 1866, soon after my arrival in America, when I clerked in a drug store in Hoboken, N. J. It was a fine afternoon when I went with a friend for a walk along the Palisades toward Fort Lee when—lo and behold, a small bird of rare beauty crossed the road and alighted in a tree nearby. I stood in wonderment at the strange apparition, did not know its name but found out that it was an American Redstart, an old male, one of the most strikingly dressed members of the American Wood-warbler family. My next acquaintance with American birds was made in the fall of the same year at Savannah, Georgia. On my first day of leisure I walked out of town into the woods, when a Cardinal Redbird crossed my way and perched not far away in a tree. A Cardinal would draw the attention of anybody with an eye for beauty, but for me it was an event ever to be remembered. My next surprise was when on December 25, 1866, I saw swallows (Tree Swallows) flying up and down a crowded street in New Orleans, Louisiana. This was such an unexpected sight that I sat down immediately to write to my father the news that I saw swallows on Christmas Day! My fourth acquaintance was the Purple Martin. It was when on March 28, 1867, the steamboat on which I traveled from New Orleans to St. Louis reached Vicksburg where it stopped two and one-half hours. It was here that I noted in my diary, "Grosse schwarze Schwalben" (large black swallows), which afterwards I learned to know as our good friend the Purple Martin. On this ascent of the Mississippi River, which lasted from March 26 to April 1, I had my first opportunity to get an idea of the rich bird life along this river, for I noted ducks by thousands, geese, hawks, plovers, gulls, grebes, crows, and vultures.

Once in St. Louis I had no opportunity to commune with nature for many years. I had to tend to business, not eight hours of the day,

but sixteen hours, with only half a day off during the week and every other Sunday while a clerk, and nothing off while proprietor. It was in 1873 when I saw my first Baltimore Oriole. It came to a peach tree in my garden, when his strong whistle called my attention to him. The first male Baltimore is not easily forgotten and I did not forget him, especially since my young wife, too, had the pleasure of admiring his beauty and hearing his wild notes.

When after years of steady application to business I began to take life easier and allowed myself short walks into nature, which at that time was found not far away, I noticed birds which were entirely new to me but resembled somewhat in shape and behavior birds of Europe as for instance, Ammern, Buntings, Finken, Finches, Spechte, Woodpeckers, etc. I told my wife about it and expressed the wish to become better acquainted with our American birds, know their names and learn what others knew about them. She did not say anything, but when Christmas came, there were ten numbers of Jasper's Birds of North America on the table, a work that had begun to appear a short time before and was the first popular work to bring colored pictures of all the birds found in North America. This was on Christmas, 1874. She had subscribed for the whole work which took four years to be completed in forty parts, each part containing three colored ones, one plain plate and eight pages of text. I may call the acquisition of this work the starting point of my career as a bird student and therefore as a bird lover, because the better I became acquainted with birds, the more I loved them. From now on I tried to get away from home and business as often as I could in order to see what new bird I might find in a walk of an hour or two. My favorite place was a piece of timber less than a mile away from home. Many a happy hour did I spend on and about this place and learned how many different kinds of birds can be found on a small piece of ground when carefully looked over and frequently visited at all times of the year.

When I found that I could risk to leave my store an entire forenoon in charge of a clerk and apprentice, I extended my excursions to the River des Peres at the city limits. There in a piece of timber, by me called Giant Wood, because of its large number of giant trees, I found a real paradise for a bird lover. There were no street cars at that time running so far out and the place was therefore not easily reached, but my great love of birds, which had by this time reached a stage of real enthusiasm for finding something new every day, overcame all difficulties. It was a long walk, eight miles, but I knew no fatigue, because I had the best time of my life in that giant wood.

Although within the city limits, I hardly ever met a human being in that wood; it was undefiled nature, and what grand nature! Enormous trees of different species with a variety of lower trees and a thicket of shrubs and weeds to cover the ground. The Great Horned Owl was breeding in it; the Red-shouldered and Sparrow Hawk and the Mississippi Kite had their nests, and in migration time nearly every species found about St. Louis could be met with, in or around my giant wood. On the morning of a fifth of May I counted eighty species, fifty of them without moving from the spot on a bluff above the River des Peres.

At this time I used to carry a campstool, a drudgery in appearance but a blessing and a great help in the field, for to be successful in watching birds one must have patience and a camp chair is a keeper of patience. There are some species of birds which in spite of all patience and the best glass are almost impossible to tell apart in the field; to be sure one has to have such birds in the hand. It was therefore soon after I came in possession of my first bird book that I told my wife that, though I could identify most birds, there were some I should like to procure in order to study the details, such as measure, indispensable with some interesting species. Another Christmas came around and with it an elegant cane-gun, jet black, highly polished and an unscrewable handle, allowing the insertion of a small shell containing a number of fine shot. The pressure on a button discharged the deadly pellets, fatal to small birds at a short distance, but hardly able to kill a bird larger than a Robin. It was my wife again who thus helped and encouraged me in my bird study and I used my cane for several years with good effect until I loaned it to a friend and never saw it again. Fortunately another kind of cane-gun had been brought into the market and I became the happy owner of one. It was a heavier cane, shooting larger pellets out of a two inch reloadable shell. I had it until lost in the fire of my house in 1902. For larger birds I had a double-barreled shot gun, a Lefancheux, pin fire, which I had brought from Germany in 1872, but seldom used it. I hated to be seen with such an instrument of murder and it was too heavy to carry on my long walks. It, too, went up in the fire of the house in Old Orchard.

It was in April, 1889, that I quitted the drug business and moved into the country with the intention of putting my whole time to the study of birds and extend it over the entire state of Missouri. Having added a horse and wagon to our equipment a larger part of St. Louis County came under my observation and a standing invitation to use the house and grounds of the Horse Shoe Lake Club in the neighboring

St. Charles County allowed me to become acquainted with a bird population not well known before, the inhabitants of marshes, sloughs, ponds, and lakes. In the nineties some of my most enjoyable and profitable days with birds and all nature were spent in southeast Missouri, to which region I made short but repeated visits. I had obtained permission to use the house of the Knobel Hunting and Fishing Club as a base for my explorations. The house was built on piles in the St. Francis River at Bertig, to which point a spur of a railroad had just been finished. In spring the St. Francis River is in places several miles wide, spreading in arms called sloughs and separating the higher levels into islands. The vegetation of this region is as interesting as its birds, for it is different from that of the rest of the state.

When a bridge was built over the St. Francis, the railroad was extended through the heavy timber on the Missouri side to Hornersville on the Little River. As a base for the naturalist Hornersville was hardly inferior to Bertig on the St. Francis, for the Little River in springtime reaching with its arms a width of seven miles has here a widening or opening as they call it, with a beachy shore to which waders are attracted. A larger opening called Big Lake is only a few miles south of Hornersville and is known as the winter home of innumerable ducks. While the St. Francis region is the place where I made the discovery of the nesting of the Bachman Warbler, in the Little River region I had the good fortune to find the first nest of the Brown Creeper south of the pine woods of the northern U. S. A few articles in the *Auk* treat of visits to this region.

Also fruitful in its way is the Ozark region of our state. My delving into it extended from Cape Girardeau on the east to Noel and Lamar in the southwest with the White River as its crowning point of enjoyment. Missouri is a large state and after getting acquainted with one part of it, one feels it would be just as interesting to visit other parts to compare them and find out in which way they differ from one another. A visit to East Leavenworth, where our U. S. Government owns along the bank of the Missouri River a virgin forest remains as fresh in my memory as if it happened yesterday, though it is twenty years since it happened. Also a sojourn at Langdon in the northwest corner of the state, a pleasant summer resort for fishermen and a good place for anybody. Another trip I remember well, was along the Missouri River in the great bend of it in Saline County, a fine place for the duck hunter and therefore a good place for certain other birds, not found elsewhere. Another similarly rich field for an ornithologist is a marshy plain opposite Quincy, Illinois. In his wanderings the

bird student drops in on many a nice place where he would like to remain longer, but some of them make a deeper impression in his mind than others and it is wonderful how our picture-recording brain can after years and years reproduce sights with astonishing vividness.



OTTO WIDMANN, IN 1883.

Two visits to Louisiana, chiefly the region of New Orleans and north of Lake Pontchartrain with a trip to New Iberia and Avery Island brought me much knowledge of the bird life of our southern states in winter. "A Visit to Audubon's Birthplace," is the title of a paper dealing with this region.

When my wife saw how happy I was with my birds, she took more and more interest in them herself. She had always loved flowers and admired everything beautiful in nature as well as in art. why should

she not love the birds and make friends of them? On our voyage to and from Europe in 1902, instead of playing cards like most others did, we watched constantly for birds and anything alive in or above the great waste of water, and we were well rewarded for the Atlantic was alive with birds, both going in April and coming in September. And we never forgot to look out for our feathered friends in Germany and Switzerland.

The year 1903, the year after our European tour, is memorable for our participation in the Ornithologists' Union trip to California. This was a great treat, for it brought us into company of the leading ornithologists of America and opened to our admiring eyes America's most charming region. A few days in Yosemite were like being in paradise, and the days with the whole party at the Petrified Forest, the Grand Canyon and at Hesperia in the Mohave Desert can never be forgotten. A second visit to California in 1915 renewed former acquaintance with birds and their friends, for it was also a meeting of the A. O. U. and a longer sojourn at Los Angeles and San Diego increased our love for California and it was with heavy heart we said adieu and not without a hope for a revoir. Mention of one of our first longer trips, a visit to Wequetonsing, Michigan, in 1901, must not be entirely omitted, for it was an enjoyable call on some bird friends in their summer home, friends we had only opportunity to greet on their short stop-overs in migration.

After our return from Europe and removal to the city in 1903, my wife was my constant companion and soon became well acquainted with all common birds, especially with their notes and songs, for which she had an excellent ear and good memory. This was of great benefit to me in later years when my hearing began to fail me in the catching of the high notes. A genuine delight are my recollections of our sojourns in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, twice in Colorado Springs and once in Estes Park.

With advancing years our chances to see a varied bird life were more and more handicapped by disability to cover much ground. We had to confine our visits to places easily reached and having good walks and benches to rest when tired. With the advent of the new mode of transportation our circle of visiting places was much enlarged and we had many delightful hours with nature until on May 18, 1921, my good wife, life partner for over forty-nine years, left me dependent for companionship on my children and grandchildren.

Being by nature shy and retiring I never became a good mixer and attended meetings but seldom. I never tried to be a public speaker

and being a poor talker and not caring much for social diversion I had so much more time for writing. My circle of correspondents was large and with some of them I kept up the correspondence for many years, but I never liked to write for publication. I always kept a diary in which I noted every bird and other matter of interest including weather and plant life. It was in the nineties, when I thought I had collected enough material to begin with writing a Catalog of the Birds of Missouri, giving distribution, dates and other matter of interest not generally known at that time. I had finished the landbirds, when I left for Europe in April, 1902, intending to add the waterbirds after my return, but on the last day of July my house burned down and not only the manuscript but my entire diary of twenty-five years went up in smoke. This irreparable loss discouraged me terribly and it took several years before I could be persuaded to save at least whatever I could by bringing together the material for the "Preliminary Catalog of the Birds of Missouri," which the Academy of Science of St. Louis published in 1907.

RESUME

Otto Widmann born at Karlsruhe, Baden, Germany, June 15, 1841. Grandparents: Fathers' side, Christoph Heinrich Widmann, 1765-1837; Fredricke Marie Dresch, 1753-1814. Mother's side, Christoph Baumann, 1763-1835; Christine Nothardt, 1766-1835. Father, Christoph Freidrich Widmann, 1796-1871. Mother, Catherine Baumann, 1804-1851. Attended Lyceum in Karlsruhe, October 1, 1848-April 1, 1857. Apprenticed to apothecary in Karlsruhe April 1, 1857-October 1, 1860. Clerked at Freiburg, Schwetzingen and Neuchatel, October 1, 1860 to October 1, 1863. Studied in Polytechnicum, Karlsruhe, October, 1863-July, 1864. Graduated in pharmacy July 22, 1864. Visited London and Paris, 1864-June, 1865; Dresden, July, 1865-March, 1866. Came to America, March, 1866. Clerked in Hoboken, Savannah, New Orleans and St. Louis, March, 1866-December, 1867. Proprietor, December, 1867. Visited Germany, November, 1871-August, 1872. Married in Mannheim Germany, to Auguste Bender, March 5, 1872. Retired from business and lived at Old Orchard, April, 1889-April, 1902. Visited Europe, April, 1902-September, 1902. I am living at 5105 Enright Avenue, St. Louis, since January 1, 1903.

ST. LOUIS, MO.